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ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 1

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US probing drug links to CIA's flights

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Special to the Globe

Federal investigators speculate that drug traffickers infiltrated a system under which contra supply planes contracted by the CIA flew in and out of US airports free of customs inspections.

According to officials familiar with the situation, the CIA and the Customs Service are conducting separate investigations to determine whether drugs were smuggled into the United States by traffickers who had learned that routine customs inspections were suspended for the officially sanctioned flights.

Between 50 and 100 flights that had been arranged by the CIA took off from or landed at US airports during the the past two years without undergoing inspections, officials said.

A CIA spokeswoman, Kathy Pherson, said the agency neither engaged in nor condoned drug trafficking. Pherson also denied that the agency received special consideration in avoiding customs inspections for its flights.

However, two customs officials confirmed that the planes escaped customs inspections and others inside the customs agency confirmed the existence of such an arrangement. They said that originally the system provided for the CIA to notify the Customs Service that a certain flight was about to leave from or land at a US airport. That way, the customs inspectors would not be surprised by any of the technical cargo that might be found aboard.

"But our inspectors took that to mean 'hands off everything.' And they stopped checking everything, personal belongings as well as cargo," one customs official said. "It was an invitation for problems."

Detailing the program, the official said that the CIA would inform the Custom Service's intelligence division that it had officially sanctioned a particular flight between Central America and the United States. That notification was then relayed through Custom Service's Washington headquarters to the inspectors at the pertinent airfield.

Having become aware in recent weeks of possible abuses in the system, customs and CIA investigators have been trying to determine the identities of all those on the flights to determine if they had any drug connections. One recent CIA check showed that suspected drug traffickers were involved in at least two of the flights, an administration official said earlier this week.

Of even greater concern to the agencies, however, is the suspicion that drug trafficking networks learned of the no-inspection procedure and took advantage of the situation by pretending that their flights were part of the government-sanctioned operation.

"They bluffed their way past our inspectors," said one customs official. "We've had definite indication that some of these flights were able to get by uninspected because the people on them bluffed their way through."

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Exploitation suspected

The official said he also believes that some of those involved in the contra supply network established by Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, the deputy fired from the National Security Council late last year, may also have taken advantage of the system. North, working with retired military officers and private groups, oversaw the supplying of lethal equipment to the contras between 1984 and 1986, when the CIA was banned by Congress from supplying such assistance, according to the Tower Commission report.

The Customs Service began to suspect problems with the procedure last month after one government-contracted plane, which had been unexpectedly questioned by a customs inspector at Miami International Airport, was represented by a man with extensive drug smuggling connections. The man, Michael B. Palmer, told customs inspectors that he represented Vortex Corp., which was engaged in shipping humanitarian aid to the contras on behalf of the State Department.

While the State Department vouched for the flight, when customs agents checked Palmer's name in their computers they found that he was under indictment in Detroit for his role in a conspiracy to smuggle marijuana between Colombia and the United States. No drugs were found on the Vortex plane, however.

While there is no evidence that drugs were smuggled aboard any of the flights arranged by the CIA, "with there having been no inspections, we've got to fear the worst."

The official said that he was willing to outline the no-inspec-

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tion procedure – and flaws in it – because of the probability that next month's Iran-contra hearings in Congress will include allegations of drug-running against those involved in the effort to provide support for the Nicaraguan rebels.

"There will be people alleging drugs were brought back on CIA-contracted planes, but I don't believe it," said the customs official. "What happened was that these people, these free-lancers, took advantage of our program. That's bad enough and it happens to be true."

The official also said he expected independent counsel Lawrence Walsh and his staff of investigators to seek indictments for abuse of the inspection-free system.

The problems outlined in the customs officials' remarks provide the first official indication as to how drug smuggling might have been involved in the operation to provide support for the rebels, who are known as contras. But it also raises questions about whether a process set up by the CIA and the Customs Service may have facilitated the shipment of weapons to the contras during the period when the CIA was prohibited from providing military assistance to the rebels.

Reports of smuggling

There have been news reports that people involved in supporting the rebels participated in drug smuggling. Michael Tolliver, a pilot convicted of drug smuggling, has told reporters in recent months that he was part of a guns- and drug-smuggling scheme. He said that in March 1986 he was paid $75,0000 to fly 28,500 pounds of military supplies to the contras. On the return flight, according to a report by "West 57th St." the CBS news show, Tolliver brought back 25,000 pounds of marijuana, landing at Homestead Air Force Base in southern Florida.

Although he provided no names, Tolliver said he believed that the operation was engineered by "someone in either the top four, three slots of the CIA." The CIA denied Tolliver's assertions.

While echoing the CIA's denial, an official of the Customs Service told the Globe recently that Tolliver's story has "credibility. We think he did land at Homestead."

However, the official said that customs believed that instead of being attached to a CIA operation, Tolliver was a "free-lancer."

"Unless you believe that the CIA is involved in drug trafficking, which I do not, then the only reasonable explanation is that he knew from his contacts there was an inspection-avoidance system in place there and bluffed his way through it," the official said.

"We presumed the agency was shipping radio equipment and the like down there and it was best not to have inspectors going through the cargo," said the official. He said that while the program called for the inspectors to look at the personal belongings of those on the plane, some inspectors have told superiors they believed they were to avoid examining anything aboard the plane.

The official said that in the future any inspection-avoidance system that customs agrees to adopt with the CIA "is going to be much tighter than what we had before."

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